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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Fred Horvat

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->From the Editor's Keyboard           "Saying it like it is!"
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The holiday season is over but for the returning of unwanted gifts and preparing unwanted gifts for "re-gifting" - you know the ones I mean: the tacky ties and other clothing! Sure, we all received some really nice gifts to enjoy, as well. Personally, I can also attest to that fact! All of us here at A-ONE hope that you had a terrific holiday with family and friends!

So, the new year is rapidly approaching. Personally, I can't wait until this year is over and done - it's been a terrible year full of numerous tragedies and major headaches - some of which have yet to be resolved. Still, the new year has to be better than this one! Hopefully, the new year will present you all with better times, and full of prosperity (however you wish to define "prosperity"!).

Happy New Year!

Until next time...

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Video Games and Shooting: Is The NRA Right?

The NRA says the problem with mass shootings like the recent one at the Sandy Hook grade school in Connecticut is not too many unregulated guns but violent video games. But most academic and government research does not support the gun lobby's charge.

After a week of silence following the Sandy Hook school shooting that killed 20 first graders and six staff in Newtown, Conn., the National Rifle Association blamed the entertainment industry specifically the producers of violent video games for inciting what has become a pattern of gun violence in the United States.

In describing the industry, NRA Vice President Wayne LaPierre said, There exists in this country a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people.

Mr. LaPierre faulted the news media for failing to report on vicious, violent video games such as Grand Theft Auto, Mortal Kombat, and Splatterhouse as egregious examples. He also singled out Kindergarten Killer, a free, fairly obscure online game.

How come my research department could find it and all of yours either couldn't or didn't want anyone to know you had found it? he asked reporters.

Most academic research, as well as studies by the FBI and the US Secret Service, examining the link between violent video games and incident of violence does not support the gun lobby's charge.

For example, a 2008 report by researchers at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital funded by the US Department of Justice found that violent video games may increase bullying or physical fighting in schools, but not mass gun violence.

It's clear that the big fears bandied about in the press that violent video games make children significantly more violent in the real world; that they will engage in the illegal, immoral, sexist and violent acts they see in some of these games are not supported by the current research, at least in such a simplistic form, the report states.

Joan Saab, director of the visual and cultural studies program at the University of Rochester in New York, says the gaming industry should share in the blame for promoting military weaponry to young people, but adds that the popularity of such games reflect the larger culture we live in, which is heavily militarized, in the midst of lengthy combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ms. Saab says that the NRA's call for armed guards in schools would make that kind of military culture more pervasive for children.

If there are more armed guards in schools, kids are exposed to more guns. That's when fantasy and reality aren't blurred. When there are guns in schools, it becomes real life and the day-to-day environment becomes more dangerous than the game, she says. In Newtown, as in Aurora, Colo. and the sites of other mass shootings, the gunman was outfitted in military-style dress.

By blaming video games for gun violence, the NRA also puts itself in a vulnerable position because, as Mother Jones reports, the company partnered with gaming producer Cave Entertainment in 2006 for NRA Gun Club, a PlayStation 2 game that allows users to fire over 100 different

brand-name handguns.

LaPierre did not specify if Congress should move forward in regulating the gaming industry, perhaps because previous attempts were not successful.

A US Supreme Court ruling in 2011 struck down a California law that made it a crime to sell or rent what it classified as violent video games to minors. The ruling said the law, signed by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) in 2005, violates First Amendment protections.

In the wake of Sandy Hook, Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller introduced a bill that calls for the National Academy of Sciences to examine the possible links between violent video games and violent incidents caused by children.

Overall, gun-based video games do not wholly represent total gaming industry sales, according to data from VGChartz, a UK-based research firm that tracks gaming sales. In 2011, for example, just seven of the top 20 best-selling games in the US involve warfare simulation. The other titles Just Dance 3, Kinect Adventures! New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Madden NFL 12, and Pokemon Black/White are designed around sports, dance, and children s cartoon characters.

All of the games LaPierre mentions are more than 15 years old, with some dating back to the 1980s, with their popularity waning. For example, total unit sales in the US for the Mortal Kombat franchise dropped 70 percent in 2012, compared to the previous year total. The game debuted in 1992.

Gaming experts say that the majority of the games LaPierre cited do not portray gun violence Mortal Kombat involves hand-to-hand combat, for example. They say they do not understand why he did not single out first person shooter games such as blockbuster franchises like the Call of Duty series, which is based on simulated gun action and is considered one of the most hyper-violent on the market. In fact, according to news reports, the game was also a favorite of Adam Lanza, the Newtown gunman who spent hours at home playing it.

Some of those games [LaPierre mentions] are older than the [Newtown] shooter, who was 20, says Christopher Grant, editor-in-chief of Polygon.com, an online site based in New York City that covers gaming news and trends. I have no idea why he chose them. My theory is he didn t want to pick anything too modern [such as Call of Duty or Doom] that might overlap unfavorably with something their own members might enjoy.

Call of Duty is known as a favorite of the military and is often credited for driving up recruitment. Activision Blizzard, the company behind Call of Duty, has donated thousands of copies to the US Navy; the company also created a non-profit foundation to help returning US military veterans.

According to the NPD Group, a global market research firm, retail gaming sales in the US plummeted 20 percent in the first eight months of 2012 compared to the same time period the previous year, a trend that follows years of declining sales. Between 2008 and 2011, total sales of industry software and hardware dropped 20.5 percent. According to the gaming industry website Gamasutra, 2012 sales are expected to be the lowest since 2006.

The sales drop is representative of major shifts in the gaming industry,

which is slowly moving away from console-based games to those that are played via smartphones, digital tablets, and online through social networks.

The change has produced a new type of gamer: They are generally older, more ethnically and economically diverse, and they feed their gaming appetite in smaller bites and on-the-go, as opposed to the traditional gamer profile of a few years ago, which tended to be young males playing for hours in one sitting.

The Entertainment Software Association, an industry trade group based in Washington, reports that the average gamer today is 30 years old, the most frequent game purchaser is 35 years old, and that almost half (47 percent) of all gamers are women.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online      -      Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Another World Jaguar Pre-Order

The Retro-Gaming Connexion (RGC) association is proud to announce the upcoming release of the game Another World on cartridge for the Atari Jaguar console. The iconic game, released in the early 90s, has been adapted by Sebastien Briaïs of the group Removers of Jagware with the blessing of the original developer, Eric Chahi. You can view a video of the game being on YouTube.

The RGC is producing the game in the truest spirit of the original Jaguar releases, in cartridge form with a box and manual. In order to fund the project through the various stages of manufacture the game is being offered by pre-order. Release of the game is currently slated for Spring 2013. Each person who reserves a copy will receive a numbered confirmation slip by e-mail. The price for Another World is 62 Euros by PayPal.

Jaguar Kobayashi Maru: Final Released

Reboot of Jagware and RGCD are pleased to announce the release of Kobayashi Maru: Final.

Kobayashi Maru: Final is an updated and fine-tuned version of Reboot's freely-released game of a year ago. The game is based on an arcade favorite from the early 80s. Use your rotary controller (adjustable to allow for sensitivity of your particular spinner) or regular Jaguar pad to steer your warship in this arcade space shooter, battling countless drones and huge boss craft in ever-tougher waves of attack. Featuring subtle use of the Jaguar's RMW graphics capabilities, background graphics blend together as you tear around in the upper atmosphere over four worlds.

This version of the game has updated graphics, new sound effects, webscores, and also supports Memory Track game saves. The physical copy comes cellophane wrapped in a standard DVD box with full color printed inlay and full face printed, glass-mastered CD, direct from the factory (100% professionally produced in the UK). You can purchase your copy directly from the RGCD website.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Iran Media Report New Cyberattack by Stuxnet Worm

An Iranian semi-official news agency says there has been another cyberattack by the sophisticated computer worm Stuxnet, this time on the industries in the country's south.

Tuesday's report by ISNA quotes provincial civil defense chief Ali Akbar Akhavan as saying the virus targeted a power plant and some other industries in Hormozgan province in recent months.

Akhavan says Iranian computer experts were able to "successfully stop" the worm.

Iran has repeatedly claimed defusing cyber worms and malware, including Stuxnet and Flame viruses that targeted the vital oil sector, which provides 80 percent of the country's foreign revenue.

Tehran has said both worms are part of a secret U.S.-Israeli program that seeks to destabilize Iran's nuclear program.

The West suspects Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons program, a charge Tehran denies.

Wells Fargo Web Site Troubles Persist, U.S. OCC Issues Cyber Alert

Wells Fargo & Co customers on Friday had trouble accessing the bank's Web site for a fourth day, as a federal regulator reiterated the need for banks to have systems in place to ward off cyber attacks.

A spokeswoman for the No. 4 U.S. bank by assets said some customers may have intermittent access to their online banking, although the high volume of traffic that has flooded the site has declined.

"Our technical teams have been working around the clock to ensure our Web site is accessible to our customers," bank spokeswoman Bridget Braxton said. The bank has been posting apologies on its Twitter account.

Since September, a hacker activist group called the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Cyber Fighters has said it was targeting major banks with so-called denial of service cyber attacks. These attacks can disrupt service by deluging Web sites with high traffic.

On Tuesday, the group said in an Internet posting that it would target the "5 major US banks." In a similar posting last week, it forecast attacks against banks that included PNC Financial Services Group Inc and U.S. Bancorp, which reported some disruptions.

A PNC spokesman on Friday said the bank's systems were operating normally. Spokespersons for Bank of America Corp, JPMorgan Chase & Co and U.S. Bancorp declined to comment. Citigroup Inc could not be immediately reached.

In its alert on Friday, the U.S. Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, which regulates national banks and thrifts, said groups launching denial of service attacks had varying motives, from gaining public attention to diverting the attention of banks while launching simultaneous attacks to commit fraud or steal proprietary information.

"Banks need to have a heightened sense of awareness regarding these attacks and employ appropriate resources to identify and mitigate the associated risks," the alert said.

Banks should have sufficient staffing during attacks, work with third-party providers and share information with other banks, the OCC said.

Of five major banks, Wells Fargo on Friday had spurred the most complaints from users about access problems, according to the Web site SiteDown.co, which tracks customer reports. It listed 576 "downtime reports" in the past 24 hours.

Wells Fargo says it has 21 million active online banking customers.

McAfee s 2013 Predictions: Mobile Malware Threats Will Grow, Anonymous Will Fade

Security firm McAfee Labs released its annual Threat Predictions report this week, highlighting the potential malware, viruses and other security concerns we may see in 2013. The firm says that with the rise of more advanced mobile devices, smartphones and tablets will become an even larger focus for cybercriminals. This past year we saw a number of high-profile attacks from the hacktivist group Anonymous that had the National Security Agency on edge, however McAfee Labs believes the group will begin to decline due to incoordination and competition from more politically-motivated hackers. It has also been predicted that the threat of large-scale attacks such as Stuxnet, which is believed to have taken down Iran s computer infrastructure earlier this year, will increase as well.

Facebook Shrugs Off Instagram's New Class Action Lawsuit

For Instagram, there's good news and there's bad news about the class action lawsuit just filed against them. Bad news first: Somebody just filed a class action lawsuit. Good news: the lawyers from Instagram's parent company, Facebook, have plenty of practice getting rid of these pesky things. That might explain why they're so dismissive about the legal inconvenience a group of disgruntled Instagram users left under its tree this year. "We believe this complaint is without merit and we will fight it vigorously," says Facebook spokesman Andrew Nusca. It'll obviously take more than the half-hearted apology Instagram CEO and co-founder Kevin Systrom made at the end of last week.

The lawsuit's complaint is somewhat understandable. If you've so much as heard the word "Instagram" you've heard about how much their new terms of service stink. In it, the company declared that it "may share User Content and your information (including but not limited to, information from cookies, log files, device identifiers, location data, and usage data)" with Facebook, its subsidiaries and its "affiliates." Instagram users understood this to mean that Instagram could sell their photos to advertisers, though Systrom pushed back at that in his blog post when he more or less said that the company would revert to its old terms of service. "We don't own your photos you do," he said.

Instagram kept three key new details in place, though. One, the company maintained the ability to serve ads in your feed. Two, it said "that we may not always identify paid services, sponsored content, or commercial communications as such." Lastly, it left in place the mandatory arbitration clause that it added with the new terms of service, forcing users to waive their right to participate in class action lawsuit. That obviously didn't discourage this group of plaintiffs who said in the lawsuit that "Instagram declares that 'possession is nine-tenths of the law and if you don't like it, you can't stop us.'"

No big deal. Instagram is a part of Facebook now, and Facebook has dealt with class action lawsuits before. Just seven months ago, it got slammed with a \$15 billion class action suit from users who said that the social network was "improperly tracking the internet use of its members even after they logged out of their accounts." They haven't settled yet, but if it winds up anything like the class action lawsuit over the Beacon advertising program a few years ago, it could take years to resolve and could cost Facebook millions. With some good lawyering, though, this latest lawsuit won't cost as many millions as it could. But Instagram will never be the same.

U.S. Appeals Court Revives Workplace Cybertheft Lawsuit

In a decision that could make it easier for businesses to police cybertheft in the workplace, a U.S. appeals court revived a chemical company's lawsuit accusing a former Toronto-area employee of using her home computer to steal trade secrets from its Connecticut server.

Reversing a lower court ruling, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New York said U.S.-based MacDermid Inc may pursue civil damages claims against a former account manager under Connecticut state law, even though she conducted her alleged improper activity from her home in Fort Erie, Ontario.

Wednesday's decision may make it easier for U.S. companies to crack down on alleged computer theft that occurs in remote locations, including outside the country. In recent years, U.S. courts increasingly have dealt with cases involving downloads of corporate information by employees, both in criminal cases brought by prosecutors and civil cases filed by companies.

Jackie Deiter, the MacDermid account manager, had worked for the Waterbury, Connecticut-based company's MacDermid Chemicals unit in Mississauga, Ontario, from May 2008 until her termination in April 2011 for reasons unrelated to the lawsuit.

The company accused her of violating Connecticut laws on unauthorized computer access and misappropriating trade secrets by emailing customer data, laboratory reports, and pricing lists drawn from its Waterbury server. It said this occurred soon after Deiter had learned she was about to be fired.

Deiter admitted to emailing materials, but said in court papers that she did so for her job, and because she could not print at home from her employer-issued laptop.

U.S. District Judge Warren Eginton in New Haven, Connecticut said in November 2011 that he had no jurisdiction over MacDermid's lawsuit because Deiter had merely emailed information "from one computer in Canada to another computer in Canada."

But a unanimous three-judge panel of the 2nd Circuit said MacDermid's server was a computer under Connecticut law, and that it did not matter that Deiter had accessed it from outside the state, which she had never visited.

"Most Internet users, perhaps, have no idea of the location of the servers through which they send their emails," Circuit Judge Barrington Parker wrote for the panel.

"Here, however, MacDermid has alleged that Deiter knew that the email servers she used and the confidential files she misappropriated were both located in Connecticut," he added.

Parker also said "efficiency and social policies against computer-based theft are generally best served" by handling lawsuits in the states where computer files are misappropriated.

William Charamut, a lawyer for Deiter, declined to comment. Lawyers for MacDermid did not immediately respond to requests for comment. No criminal charges have been filed against Deiter.

In February, the 2nd Circuit threw out a federal criminal case against a former Goldman Sachs Group Inc computer programmer, saying his alleged theft of high-frequency trading code was not a crime under federal law.

Six months later, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance brought New York state criminal charges against the programmer, Sergey Aleynikov, over the same activity. Aleynikov has pleaded not guilty.

The 2nd Circuit has jurisdiction in Connecticut, New York and Vermont. It is among the more influential federal appeals courts, and other circuits often follow its reasoning.

The case is MacDermid Inc v. Deiter, 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, No. 11-5388.

China May Require Real Name Registration for Internet Access

China may require internet users to register with their real names when signing up to network providers, state media said on Tuesday, extending a policy already in force with microblogs in a bid to curb what officials call rumors and vulgarity.

A law being discussed this week would mean people would have to present their government-issued identity cards when signing contracts for fixed line and mobile internet access, state-run newspapers said.

"The law should escort the development of the internet to protect people's interest," Communist Party mouthpiece the People's Daily said in a front page commentary, echoing similar calls carried in state media over the past week.

"Only that way can our internet be healthier, more cultured and safer."

Many users say the restrictions are clearly aimed at further muzzling the often scathing, raucous - and perhaps most significantly, anonymous - online chatter in a country where the Internet offers a rare opportunity for open debate.

It could also prevent people from exposing corruption online if they fear retribution from officials, said some users.

It was unclear how the rules would be different from existing regulations as state media has provided only vague details and in practice customers have long had to present identity papers when signing contracts with internet providers.

Earlier this year, the government began forcing users of Sina Corp's wildly successful Weibo microblogging platform to register their real names.

The government says such a system is needed to prevent people making malicious and anonymous accusations online and that many other countries already have such rules.

"It would also be the biggest step backwards since 1989," wrote one indignant Weibo user, in apparent reference to the 1989 pro-democracy protests bloodily suppressed by the army.

Chinese internet users have long had to cope with extensive censorship, especially over politically sensitive topics like human rights, and popular foreign sites Facebook, Twitter and Google-owned YouTube are blocked.

Despite periodic calls for political reform, the ruling Communist Party has shown no sign of loosening its grip on power and brooks no dissent to its authority.

Student Suspended After Vague Facebook Post
About Dressing As Santa Deemed Threatening

A student in Georgia who planned to go to school dressed as Santa Claus was instead suspended after school officials perceived an enigmatic Facebook message about his plan as a threat.

On Tuesday at approximately 7 p.m., John George III, a sophomore at Crawford County High School, posted on his Facebook page: Students of cchs ur in for a big surprise tomorrow , reports WMAZ-TV.

A parent saw George s cryptic post, found it alarming in light of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and notified local police.

After further discussions with the concerned parent, a police officer in Roberta where George resides independently reviewed George s Facebook page. In the officer s opinion, George s page appeared to have a very Gothic and dark theme, WMAZ reports. There were also allusions to gangs and fighting.

By 10 p.m. Tuesday night, two local police officers were at George s residence, interrogating him as well as his parents.

George explained to the officers that his ambiguous Facebook post was a reference to a plan he and two friends had concocted to go to school attired as Santa and a couple of elves.

George s mother was able to verify that her son had purchased a Santa Claus costume recently, notes WMAZ. George said one of his teachers knew of his plans and could also confirm his alibi.

We then spoke briefly about the nature of the post and how with the recent tragedy of school shootings that had occurred that the post could cause unrest if taken the wrong way, the officers wrote in their report, according to the station. We then left the residence without further incident.

Mike Campbell, the principal at Crawford County High School, was not satisfied, however. At his request, police met George when he arrived at school Wednesday morning via school bus. They then escorted the young man directly to Campbell s office.

Campbell then suspended George, pending further fact-finding by the school s crack investigative team.

Campbell also issued a press release Wednesday that called George s Facebook post disturbing in light of the recent massacre at Sandy Hook, according to WMAZ.

George called the series of events ridiculous, WMAZ says.

George s father, John Jr., isn t pleased, either. He charged that his son s reputation has been unfairly sullied.

We don t own any guns. We don t have any of that stuff going on here and we don t believe in it. We re a good family, the elder George told the station. He s a mouthy kid like all of them, but he comes back in tune with everything and doesn t cause any problems.

Acer's \$99 Android Tablet Might Not Launch in the U.S.

Taiwanese PC vendor Acer is indeed making a cheap \$99 tablet, but it may never go on sale in the United States. Unnamed sources have told the The Wall Street Journal that Acer will target its \$99 Iconia B1 tablet toward emerging markets such as China and not more mature markets such as the United States and Europe. In fact, the Journal reports that it is uncertain whether [the Iconia B1] will actually be sold stateside at all, despite the fact that Acer submitted the tablet to the Federal Communications Commission for approval.

The Journal also confirms what we've heard about the Iconia B1's lower tier specs and reports that it will feature a 7-inch screen with a resolution of 1024 x 600 pixels and a 1.2GHz dual-core processor.

Acer is trying to beat Google (GOOG) to be the first to market with a \$99 tablet, as Google is reportedly working on a cheap version of its Nexus 7 tablet that will release next year.

U.S. Clears Way for Wider In-flight Internet Deployment

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission has cleared the way for wider adoption of in-flight Internet services, aiming to cut by as much as 50 percent the time needed for regulatory approval.

Newly adopted rules should boost competition in this part of the U.S. mobile telecommunications market and promote "the widespread availability of Internet access to aircraft passengers," the FCC said in a statement Friday.

Since 2001, the commission has cleared companies on an ad hoc basis to market in-flight broadband services via a satellite antenna fixed to an aircraft's exterior.

Under a newly adopted framework, the licensing procedures will be simpler, the commission said.

Airlines will be able to test systems that meet the commission's standards, establish that they do not interfere with aircraft systems and then get approval of the Federal Aviation Administration, the FCC statement said.

The FAA, a Labor Department arm responsible for operating the nation's air traffic control system, said in response that the FCC's effort to establish standards "will help to streamline the process" for airlines to install Internet hookups on planes.

The goal is to speed the processing of applications by up to 50 percent, FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said in a separate statement.

The FCC drive to promote broadband aboard planes does not change a ban on the in-flight use of cell phones, which is tied to concerns about interference with ground stations.

Genachowski earlier this month urged the Federal Aviation Administration to allow more electronics on aircraft.

The FAA announced in August that it was forming a government-industry group to study aircraft operators' policies to determine when portable electronic devices may be used safely during flight.

New Alleged Details of Microsoft's Windows 8 Successor Emerge

Microsoft is rumored to be switching to an annual release for its operating system starting with Windows Blue in mid-2013. According to a PCBeta forum user who goes by the pseudonym maxy and has been unofficially identified as a Microsoft official, Windows Blue or Windows 9 Dev as some call it, will get customization options in the form of Windows Phone 8's resizable app tiles. Microsoft will also reportedly still keep the legacy desktop view around, but remove the gloss on elements including the taskbar, flattening it to mesh better with the Metro UI. Maxy also says a new kernel (6.3) will be used, which should give the entire OS more polish. It's still too early to deem whether the rumor is legitimate or not, but refining Windows 8 with small nips and tucks while overhauling the underlying framework does sound highly plausible.

Teens Facebook Their Way Through Class

Paying attention? A new study finds that 94 percent of Israeli high school students surf social media sites during class.

The students are accessing these sites through their cell phones, according to the study conducted by University of Haifa researchers, and only 4 percent said they never pulled their phones out during class.

"Based on our findings, there is almost no moment during any class when some pupil isn't using their cell phone," the researchers said in a statement.

The majority of Israeli teens have cell phones, according to political science professor Itali Beeri and pre-doctoral student Dana Daniel, who conducted the study. In the United States, smartphone use is also high: 31 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds have their own smartphone, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center Report.

Likewise, teens the world over love social media. Nearly three-quarters, or 73 percent, of teens who use the Internet have at least one social network account such as Facebook or Twitter, according to a 2010 Pew survey.

The new Israeli study surveyed 591 students in grades nine through 12 at three different high schools. In addition, 144 teachers answered questions about their students' mobile phone use during class.

The vast majority of students, 94 percent, said they accessed social media or file-sharing sites "from time to time" or more frequently during class. About 95 percent said they use their phones to make recordings or take pictures during class for non-schoolwork-related purposes, and 94 percent

emailed or texted during lectures. About 93 percent of the students said they listened to music on their phones during class, and 91 percent talked on the phone.

The researchers assessed the frequency of these mobile phone distractions and found that the average pupil uses a cell phone in 60 percent of his or her classes. Contrary to expectation, cell phone use was actually higher in classes where the teacher used a strict discipline style than in classes with permissive teachers.

Boredom or apathy could be behind the rampant cell phone use, as higher-level classrooms had less cell phone use. High school seniors also buckled down, using their phones during class less often than 10th graders.

While cell phone use is a real concern among educators given the potential distractions, some schools have tried to embrace technology. In 2009, 53 fifth-grade students at Trinity Meadows Intermediate School in Keller, Tex., were given phones pre-loaded with educational software in an attempt to engage them in their lessons.

Police Offer 'Virtual Ridealongs' via Twitter

Riding side by side as a police officer answers a call for help or investigates a brutal crime during a ridealong gives citizens an up close look at the gritty and sometimes dangerous situations officers can experience on the job.

But a new social media approach to informing the public about what officers do is taking hold at police departments across the United States and Canada one that is far less dangerous for citizens but, police say, just as informative.

With virtual ridealongs on Twitter, or tweetalongs, curious citizens just need a computer or smartphone for a glimpse into law enforcement officers' daily routines.

Tweetalongs typically are scheduled for a set number of hours, with an officer or a designated tweeter like the department's public information officer posting regular updates to Twitter about what they see and do while on duty. The tweets, which also include photos and links to videos of the officers, can encompass an array of activities everything from an officer responding to a homicide to a noise complaint.

Police departments say virtual ridealongs reach more people at once and add transparency to the job.

"People spend hard-earned money on taxes to allow the government to provide services. That's police, fire, water, streets, the whole works, and there should be a way for those government agencies to let the public know what they're getting for their money," said Chief Steve Allender of the Rapid City Police Department in South Dakota, which started offering tweetalongs several months ago <https://twitter.com/rcpdtweetalong> after watching departments in Seattle, Kansas City, Mo., and Las Vegas do so.

On the day before Thanksgiving, Tarah Heupel, the Rapid City Police

Department's public information officer, rode alongside Street Crimes Officer Ron Terviel. Heupel posted regular updates every few minutes about what Terviel was doing, including the officer citing a woman for public intoxication, responding to a call of three teenagers attempting to steal cough syrup and body spray from a store and locating a man who ran from the scene of an accident. Photos were included in some of the tweets.

Michael Taddesse, a 34-year-old university career specialist in Arlington, Texas, has done several ridealongs with police and regularly follows multiple departments that conduct tweetalongs.

"I think the only way to effectively combat crime is to have a community that is engaged and understands what's going on," he said.

Ridealongs where "you're out in the elements" are very different than sitting behind a computer during a tweetalong and the level of danger is "dramatically decreased," he said. But in both instances, the passenger gains new information about the call, what laws may or may not have been broken and what transpires, he added.

For police departments, tweetalongs are just one more way to connect directly with a community through social media.

More than 92 percent of police departments use social media, according to a survey of 600 agencies in 48 states conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police's Center for Social Media. And Nancy Kolb, senior program manager for IACP, called tweetalongs a "growing trend" among departments of all sizes.

There is no set protocol and departments are free to conduct the tweetalong how they see fit, she said.

In Ontario, Canada, the Niagara Regional Police Service conducted their first virtual ridealong in August over a busy eight-hour Friday night shift. The police department's followers were able to see a tweet whenever the police unit was dispatched to one of the more than 140,000 calls received that night.

Richard Gadreau, the social media officer for the police department, said officers routinely take people out on real ridealongs, but there is a waiting list and preference is given to people interested in becoming an officer.

With tweetalongs, many calls also mean many tweets. Kolb said departments are cognizant of cluttering peoples' Twitter feeds.

That's why the Rapid City Police Department decided to create a separate account for the tweetalong, Allender said.

Kolb also said officers are careful not to tweet personal or sensitive information. Officers typically do not tweet child abuse or domestic abuse cases, and they usually only tweet about a call after they leave the scene to protect officers and callers.

But Allender, the chief of police in Rapid City, said tweetalongs also show some of the more outrageous calls police deal with on a regular basis like the kid who breaks out the window of a police car while the officer is standing on the sidewalk.

"Real life is funnier than any comedy show out there and not to make fun

of people, embarrass them or humiliate them, but people do funny things," Allender said. "... I mean, that guy deserves a little bit of ridicule, and everyone who would be watching would agree. That's just good clean fun to me."

NORAD Santa Trackers Draw Record Number of Phone Calls, Social Media Followers

NORAD says it drew a record number of phone calls and social media followers during its NORAD Tracks Santa operation on Christmas Eve.

The North American Aerospace Defence Command said Friday volunteers answered more than 114,000 calls, up 12,000 from 2011.

NORAD's Santa Facebook page had more than 1.2 million followers, up from about 1 million last year. More than 129,000 people followed on Twitter, up from 101,000 last year.

NORAD got 11,000 emails, up from 7,700 in 2011.

More than 1,250 volunteers answered phone calls, including first lady Michelle Obama.

NORAD Tracks Santa began in 1955 when a newspaper listed the wrong number for children to call Santa. They wound up calling the Continental Air Defence Command, NORAD's predecessor.

The operation is based at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado.

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